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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001667

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IS](#) [GOI](#) [INTERNAL](#)

SUBJECT: NEW YAHAD CHAIRMAN BEILIN SOUNDS BATTLE CRY
AGAINST LIKUD, BUT IS LABOR LISTENING?

REF: 03 TEL AVIV 6800

Classified By: Political Counselor Norm Olsen for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: Yossi Beilin's close victory in the new Yahad Party's chairmanship race against Meretz MK Ran Cohen blows some new life into the foundering political career of the Geneva Accords architect, but has barely ruffled the political waters. Beilin termed his win a victory for "peace, the Geneva Accord and social justice," and boldly called on Labor leader -- and Beilin mentor -- Shimon Peres to immediately "establish an opposition management" along with Yahad to "shorten Sharon's days in office." Beilin warned Labor not to join Sharon's government, saying it would be repeating an earlier mistake. His comments have nonetheless not yet elicited any reaction from Peres or other Labor leaders, and neither the birth of Yahad nor the Beilin/Cohen race have elicited more than a wide yawn from the Israeli political and media establishments. End summary.

Beilin Born Again, (and Again, and Again)

2. (SBU) Receiving about 54 percent of the vote in what was a close race until the end, Yossi Beilin defeated Meretz MK Ran Cohen for the chairmanship of the new Yahad ("together") party in its March 16 primary. Cohen Knesset colleagues Zahava Gal-On and Avshalom Vilan came out in support of Beilin at the last minute, which, aside from embarrassing Cohen, may have sealed Beilin's victory. As one of the architects and untiring champions of the Geneva Accords, Beilin has a reputation for being the worldly "statesman," while Cohen, with kibbutznik roots, is known for his overarching concern about social causes and improving the plight of Israel's poor. Both candidates reportedly objected to how they were labeled. Upon accepting his defeat, Cohen magnanimously announced that he would not establish a rival camp.

3. (SBU) The win signaled a political comeback of as yet undetermined strength for Beilin, who, after a long political career in Labor, including ministerial positions in Labor governments, left that party to join Meretz in December 2002 after Labor placed him too low on its candidate list even to compete for a Knesset seat. Beilin failed to obtain a position high enough on the Meretz Party list to receive a seat in the 16th Knesset, since Meretz lost four of its previous 10 seats. On November 20, 2003, Meretz approved a merger with Shazar, a movement formed by Beilin in June 2002, to form Yahad (refit). Beilin is not currently a Knesset Member.

Beilin Calls on Peres to Form Opposition

4. (SBU) Using his chance in the media spotlight, Beilin turned his March 16 victory speech into a challenge to his long-time mentor and Labor leader Shimon Peres to form what he referred to as an "opposition management" in order to "shorten Sharon's days in office." Beilin termed the Sharon government "the worst Israel has had," noting the continuing "cycle of terror attacks." (Note: Interestingly, the day after Beilin declared his election a victory for the Geneva Accords, full-page advertisements appeared in Israel's three major newspapers calling for readers to cast electronic votes in favor of the Geneva Accords on March 24, in the first of several "interactive demonstrations." Justice Minister Lapid announced March 17 that the State Comptroller would investigate the funding sources for Beilin's election campaign and for the Geneva initiative.) Beilin warned Labor not to join a Sharon government, threatening that if it did, he would "fight (Labor) more than we would fight the Likud."

5. (SBU) The media did not carry any official Labor reactions to Beilin's speech. Less than 24 hours after Beilin's pronouncements, however, PM Sharon met with Labor faction chair MK Dalia Itzik, reportedly to provide more details about his disengagement plan. In addition, Ha'aretz reported that at a press conference convened by Labor on March 17, Peres "declined to give a guarantee that Labor would under no circumstances join a Sharon-led government." In a display of the confusion surrounding Labor's intentions,

the Ma'ariv website, however, reported that Peres "outright rejected" the notion that it planned to form a unity government with Sharon.

Is Anyone Listening?

16. (SBU) The media paid scant attention to, and pundits spent little energy speculating over, who would win the Yahad elections. Meretz MK Roman Bronfman told poloff late afternoon of March 16 that he had no idea who would win, and had no interest in speculating about the results or its ramifications for Yahad. Most editorials on Beilin's win and on Beilin the man dismissed him as too far to the left and too far removed from the average Israeli to be a serious player in Israeli politics.

17. (C) Labor activist and organizer for the Western Galilee Nimrod Vizansky, a kibbutznik, commented to poloff on March 17 that Beilin "does not have much influence," and asserted that "whatever Beilin says right after the elections is not very important." While winning the Yahad chairmanship might have satisfied Beilin's political ambitions, Vizansky noted, Beilin is still "a small fish in a small pond."

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